

Caste in Itself, Caste and Class, or Caste in Class

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The debate surrounding the relationship between caste and class is discussed here in the context of historical and contemporary perspectives in India, maintaining that what exists in India is caste in class, not caste per se or caste and class.

AFTER the British conquered Bengal and eventually the whole of India, they set out to administer the colony. In this context they encountered two phenomena with which they were not familiar: (1) the relation of people to land for production (and not for revenue receiving, household living, etc), and (2) the caste system of India, viz, the 'jati' stratification of society.

Soon they realised that the 'varna' stratification of society (which denotes the varnas of brahmins – mainly the priests, kshatriya – the warriors, vaisya – the husbandmen, and sudra – the lowly people) is not unique to Indian society. In late 19th and early 20th century, Jolly (1896), Oldenberg (1897), Senart (1927), and others clarified that the varnas denote the status system in Hindu society, which (e.g. varnas) are found with different nomenclatures in other societies of the world. This point I had discussed in my book entitled *The Dynamics of Rural Society* (1957a).

Yet, in 1962, Srinivas (1962:63-69) rediscovered the distinction between varna and jati, and in 1995, Beteille (1996:16) eulogised this 'path-breaking essay' of Srinivas at the All-India Sociological Conference in Bhopal. However, that jatis denote the caste system of India was universally acclaimed; namely, the smallest endogamous groups of people within each varna.

The relation of Indian people to land for production (and the ancillary activities of trade and petty craft production) did not, at first, undergo this kind of confusion. It was found by the British researchers in the 18th-19th centuries that the instruments for production (viz, plough, cattle, manure, etc) were held by the Indians familywise, but the land for production was held by the villagers in common under the village community system. As later admitted by Lord Bentinck (1829), this unified strength of the Indian peasants, artisans, and traders under the village

community system was shattered by introducing the 'zamindari' system. This system was first introduced in 1793 in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa (the 'subah' of Bengal) as the 'Permanent Settlement of Land', and in due course spread all over India.

Some European scholars in late 20th century argued that the manorial system was present in India from early times in pre-British India, and that the village community system is a myth. However, the falsification of history in this manner has not been accepted by the bulk of scholars.

They have documented that the village community system had originated at the threshold of the present millennium or some centuries earlier, and flourished up to the 11th century AD. The steady but the slow growth of indigenous capitalism in India, tried to undermine the village community system, especially during the Mughal period, and ventured upon establishing the manorial system. This point was first mentioned by Kosambi (1955) and later elaborated by Irfan Habib and others. However, such was the gravity of the village community system that it could not be uprooted by indigenous capitalism: indeed, it made the capitalist development of India slow because the latter could not penetrate village India and create a home market. The point was underscored as late as the middle of the present century by the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee (1951).

However, the falsification of the role of caste (jati) system in India took a distinctive turn from the beginning of researches into the caste system by the British scholars in the 18th-19th centuries and most of the Indian scholars swallowed the myth hook, line and sinker.

In my aforementioned book and in *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company* (1957 b:140-212) I had shown that the jati division of society denoted the relation of

people to land for production and the ancillary artisanal and trading activities. The jatis proliferated along with specialisation and division of labour in society; but movements against the jati system gathered momentum along with the advent of capitalism in Indian society on its own merit. The point has been elaborated by later scholars.

I had also shown, especially in *The Dynamics of Rural Society*, that the caste system received a new lease of life by invaginating itself into the colonial class system ushered in by the colonialists. Moreover, I discussed in *The Rise and Fall of the East India Company* (1957b:313-35) that the anti-caste movements of 14th-17th centuries were suppressed by the British by enacting laws supporting the Hindu and the Muslim orthodoxies from the time of Warren Hastings in India (1772-86). But this real history of India was distorted by the British scholars, and the bulk of the Indian scholars followed suit.

The jati division of society was viewed in the realm of 'cultural' relations, viz, inter-dining, inter-marriage, purity-pollution, and such other customary behaviour and perception. The fact that in British India the landlords, big landowners, wholesale traders, moneylenders, etc, belonged essentially to the high castes was overlooked, as was the fact that the bulk of self-sufficient peasants, small-scale artisans, petty traders, etc, belonged to the middle castes in general. And, those at the lowest echelon of the growing colonial-capitalist class structure (such as, the marginal peasants, landless workers, etc) belonged overwhelmingly to the lowest castes and the 'tribes'. This is how the caste structure had invaginated itself into the class structure evolved in colonial India.

Doubtless, all high caste people did not belong to the highest echelon of the growing class structure, just as all those belonging to the middle castes did not belong to the middle echelon of the class structure, and all those belonging to the lowly castes did not belong to the lowest echelon of the class structure. But an overview of Hindu society substantiated this correlation between the caste and the capitalist class structures [Mukherjee 1957a:1-58]. Contrariwise, the view that was ideologically imposed by those who hailed the British rule in India is that the caste structure ruled the society.

Max Weber denounced the fact that the caste system denoted the relations of

production and property in ancient and medieval India by proclaiming that it was the product of 'brahmanical theodicy'. In his own words (Weber 1958:131):

All factors important for the development of the caste system operated singly elsewhere in the world. Only in India, however, did they operate conjointly under specific Indian conditions: the conditions of a conquered territory within ineffable, sharp, 'racial' antagonisms made socially visible by skin colour...[This] well-integrated, unique social system could not have originated or at least could not have conquered and lasted without the pervasive and all-powerful influence of the brahmins. It must have existed as a finished idea long before it conquered even the greater part of north India. The combination of caste legitimacy with 'karma' doctrine, thus with the specific brahmanical theodicy – in its way a stroke of genius – plainly is the construction of rational ethical thought and not the production of any economic 'condition'.

As opposed to this 'cultural' interpretation of caste in itself, Karl Marx had written earlier (1964:101-02):

The primitive forms of property dissolve into the relations of property to the different objective elements conditioning production; they are the economic basis of different forms of community, and in turn presupposes specific forms of community. These forms are significantly modified once labour itself is placed among the *objective conditions of production* as in slavery and serfdom.

[Where] the particular kind of labour – i.e., its craft mastery and consequently property in the instruments of labour – equals property in the conditions of production, this admittedly excludes slavery and serfdom. However, it may lead to an *analogous negative development in the form of a caste system* (emphasis added).

Marx's formulation of caste for class under specific feudal conditions was stoutly rejected by Weber who, however, had misconceived caste by his formulation of 'brahmanical theodicy' to denote merely the varna stratification of society. Later Indianists following Weber extended the formulation *caste in itself to the jati stratification of society*. In this respect, Louis Dumont (1966) raised the misconception to an Olympian height by declaring the uniqueness of caste-ridden Indian people as Homo Hierarchicus. The general run of western scholars and the great majority of Indian scholars, led by M N Srinivas, supported and propagated the perception that caste sans class represented 'modern' India. Sanskritisation

and westernisation were proclaimed to be the vehicles for ushering in "social change in modern India" [Srinivas 1966].

A false consciousness was thus generated in India, and spread in society. No wonder that a political scientist wrote in *Reader's Digest* in 1950 that caste is in Indian blood!

Meanwhile, the inexorable course of capitalism, doubtless colonial in character, was spreading in India. From the 1920s, in particular, land and crops began to turn into commodities from their subsistence character. Alienation of land and accumulation of crops enriched some (though not many) peasants, artisans and traders who were placed low or still lower in the caste hierarchy. Now, in conformity with their enhanced economic status, they aspired for a better 'social' status. A new alignment between caste and class was in the offing, in place of the caste structure merely invaginating itself into the class structure of society.

This alignment was viewed by the national chauvinists, as a variant of the decolonised modernisers upholding the view of caste in itself, as the interaction of two discrete entities caste and class: class being imported by the Raj and not displaying itself from immemorial times as caste for class – in the view of Marx. Bose (1949, 1976) portrayed the structure

of Hindu society in terms of caste division, and Beteille (1966) elaborated the thesis by clearly writing on caste, class and power.

Caste and class became a catchy formulation to denote the social structure of Indian society. However, with its ideological ('cultural') commitment it soon merged itself into the formulation of caste in itself and employed the same idioms as sanskritisation and westernisation to denote "social change in modern India".

Meanwhile, colonial capitalism and later, the independent Indian capitalism system, had their impact on the invagination of jatis into the capitalist social structure. In the last days of the Raj, the 'Depressed Classes' clamoured for equality in economic and cultural perception and behaviour with the 'high castes', and the Raj pacified them by enacting the Scheduled Castes Order in the 1930s, in order to consolidate their own political position in society. After independence in 1947, the Indian rulers retained the nomenclature of the scheduled castes, and added that of the scheduled tribes, although, by this time, there were no tribes as undifferentiated (or little differentiated) groups of people even in the remote corners of India [see, for instance, Bose 1985]. Later, the government further categorised the 'other backward classes' in order to make the new avatar of caste hierarchy complete;

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UNESCO says: 'To speak of an Aryan 'race' or 'people' is a mere myth'. Vivekananda remarked, 'All these monstrous lies are taught to our boys!' Vol. V, P. 537
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This is an anthology of essays taken from the Asiatic Researches (1775 to 1804). Discover the India which the British convinced us, did not exist. That India colonised and civilised Greece, Egypt and Mesopotamia, that India was the paradise of the Bible.
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Sir William Jones wrote that the Chinese are of Indian origin (Asiatic Researches, Vol. II). The author carried on extensive research to trace out the full history of India's great achievement.
- (Mahabodhy Book Agency – 4A, Bankim Chatterjee St., Cal-700 073).

namely, the high castes, other backward classes, the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes.

Yet, the social processes heralding the triumph of class structure over the caste hierarchy could not be altogether ignored by the avatar makers of caste. But they obfuscated reality. Srinivas mooted the notion of 'dominant caste' in the 1960s, in which caste was in the appellation and not in content. His identification of a 'dominant caste' was by six attributes; namely, (1) 'sizeable amount of the arable land locally available', (2) 'strength of numbers', (3) 'high place in the local hierarchy', (4) 'western education', (5) 'jobs in the administration', and (6) 'urban sources of income' [Srinivas 1966:10-11].

All these attributes are secondary or tertiary expressions of the formation of the top stratum of the class structure in rural society. But the proclamation of class relations was an anathema to these conservative scholars. So, class was forcibly funnelled into an amorphous identity of the 'dominant caste' because, as later admitted by its progenitor, all its six attributes need not be present in one caste entity. In other words, the 'dominant caste' could be identified in $(2^6-1=)$ 63 ways!

The result was that the devout young scholars were duly brain-washed to search for the 'dominant caste' in different societal segments in various ways, and even assert the dominant class character of the identified 'dominant caste'! For example, in Jehanabad district of the state of Bihar, the landless agriculturists of low castes have organised themselves for a better deal from the big landowners – the bhumiwar brahmins, while the landowners have retaliated ruthlessly. They have even formed a paramilitary force by the name of Ranvir Sena which regularly organises mass murder of the landless families. The government hardly takes any action on this issue, while some enthusiastic academics search for the role of 'dominant caste' at this junction in society. Instances like this, found in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, etc. have led to the confusion of the 'caste-ridden' society to be worse confounded, which provides succour to the role of the caste system in present day India.

Today, casteisation of society is proceeding at the level of *hoch politik* with the help of some academics. At the other extreme, at the level of *neben politik*, caste is denoted more and more as an identification *within* the class-stratum its constituents belong to. This is similar to the distinction drawn between the Jews and the Gentile, or the ethnic groups, within the class structure of the US, Britain, etc.

Indeed, the reinforced false consciousness, generated by the scholars and the politicians alike, has been so pervading in the upper political level than even in relatively recent times the Mandal Commission earmarked caste as the criterion of backwardness in Indian society. Scholars like Srinivas was a party to thus enforcing the false consciousness of social reality of India. From the academia I P Desai's was the lone voice to castigate this manner of falsification of social reality. In a seminal article [Desai 1984: 1115] he emphasised that the criterion of 'backwardness' should be sought in the class relations in modern India. But his voice was smothered by the dominant scholars and politicians.

In the mean time, reality went on asserting itself at the grass roots level. The correlation between caste and class in colonial India is being transformed into 'caste in class'. The scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes – not to speak of the other backward classes – are ranged within the spectrum of the high, middle, and low echelons of the class system in society. This is clearly manifest in the political alliances among these categories.

Also in 'cultural' matters, the differentiation is being growingly manifest within the evolved class categories of the scheduled castes and 'tribes', such as even among the santhals, oraons and mundas of Bihar, lodhas of Bengal, sabarans of Orissa and Bengal, etc.

In this respect, I found from a quality of life study in 1980 in Delhi and its environs that the upper echelon of the scheduled castes were aspiring for 'cultural' equality with the upper echelon of the high caste. K L Sharma said in a seminar of the department of sociology of Jawaharlal Nehru University in 1997 that he has found from his study of a number of villages in Rajasthan over 10 years that the 'upper' scheduled castes are inviting the upper echelon of the 'high castes' to their life-cycle ceremonies like marriage, and the latter ones are heartily participating in the ceremonies [Sharma 1997].

On the other hand, rumblings of discontent are heard within the monolithic constructions of the lowly castes; such as, of the dalits (literally, the downtrodden). Nadkarni has shown (1997:2160-71) that in southern parts of Tamil Nadu the 'weaker' sections of the dalits are raising their voice against the usurping 'stronger' segment of the dalits. Such discontent is not unheard of in Maharashtra, Gujarat, and even in Bihar (such as, among the santhals and oraon-mundas).

Thus, it is that we should not look at caste as a 'new avatar' as scholars like Srinivas have recently proclaimed. Class structure has cut across the caste hierarchy, forming new alliances and antagonisms. Indeed, it is in the process of withering away of a phenomenon along with the march of history or remain as an atavism, like, the distinction between the Jews and the Gentile, the Hindus and the Muslims. Yet, it is propped up, for their own gain, by the politicians and a brand of social scientists. Today, in India, caste in class depicts the reality, and not caste per se or caste and class.

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